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ABSTRACT

An experiment was conducted to test the theory that young boys prefer the companionship of their fathers in play activities to that of their mothers, while young girls have no particular preference. It was hypothesized that a boy has this preference because he has been cared for primarily by his mother, and his discovery of sex-identity leaves him particularly insecure in his shifting sex-role, thus producing a strong affinity for the most available masculinity model, his father. Girls develop no such preference because they have been primarily cared for by the same-sex parent, a less confusing and less traumatic situation. This theory was tested by placing children in seven play situations and asking them which parent they would like to have join them in each of the activities. The subjects were 150 2-, 3-, and 4-year-olds (76 boys and 74 girls). The criterion for parent preference was 4 or more choices of one parent. Analysis of the data revealed that the boys significantly preferred the father to the mother. Girls showed no consistent parent preference for the total sample, but this was the result of significant preferences: for the father at age 2 and for the mother at age 4. (MH)

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Parent Preference of Preschool Children

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The purpose of this study was to investigate hypotheses in a theory of sex-role and parental identification; specifically hypotheses about parent preferences of preschool children. In all earlier works, parent preference has been determined either by projective techniques or by direct questioning. In contrast, this study required the actual presence of the chosen parent.

Ammons and Ammons (1949) asked for doll-play parent choices from children aged three to five. Sometimes they asked which parent the child doll liked best following some activity, and sometimes which parent the child doll wished to be with, to help, or be helped by, to engage in some activity with, etc. Three- and four-year-old boys had a definite preference for the father, but five-year-old boys had a slight preference for the mother (though not statistically significant). Three-year-old girls had a slight preference for the father, but four- and five-year-old girls had a definite mother preference. Combining ages, there was a significant sex difference,with boys showing a father preference and girls a mother preference.

Lynn (1969) studied parent preference using a structured doll play procedure with children from two through six. Combining ages, there was a sex difference in which each sex preferred the same-sex parent more frequently. The sexes differed significantly at every age but six; each sex choosing the same-sex parent. At six, however, boys showed a slight tendency to choose the mother doll. All of the doll-play situations centered on the home, and therefore seemed biased in favor of a mother choice. So it is interesting that boys chose the father doll anyway, even in those situations that seemed very much mother oriented, such as the one in which a parent feeds the child.

Brown (1957), using the It Scale with children between the ages of approximately, 5½ and 11½, asked whether It would prefer being a mother or a daddy when It grows up. Of the boys in all age groups, 77% to 95% indicated a preference for daddy. Of the younger girls (from kindergarten through the fourth grade), 52% to 77% also expressed a father preference. The pattern was reversed with fifth-grade girls, with 79% expressing a mother preference.

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Kagan and Lemkin (1960) asked three- to eight-year-old children, both directly and indirectly, whether they would like to grow up to be their mother or their father. There was a significant sex difference in the parent chosen, with both sexes tending to choose the same-sex parent. The girls, however, showed a slight tendency to choose the father more frequently than boys did the mother.

Rabban (1950) asked children between two-and-one-half and eight years old, "When you grow up would you like to be a mamma or a daddy?" Many three-year-old boys and girls preferred the opposite-sex parent role. More interestingly, there was a tendency among six-year-olds for girls to choose the mother less frequently than for boys to choose the father. This was true although practically all of them were aware of sex differences generally and of their own sex specifically.

The theoretical formulation of this study postulates that very young boys, perceiving that they belong in a different sex category from the mother, are highly motivated to avoid being feminine and to acquire masculine characteristics. This should be reflected in their overall tendency to elect to be with the father rather than the mother given the choice, since the father represents a model of masculinity. At first, this preference for being with the father, rather than the mother, should be particularly strong because, being insecure in their shifting sex roles, boys would be particularly anxious not to remain identified with the mother. Thus, being in fact poorly identified with masculinity, he strongly rejects the mother and prefers being with the father.

Girls, on the other hand, since they are of the same sex as their initial caretaker, the mother, and require no sex-role shift, should experience no powerful motivation to be with the parent of the same sex, the mother.

The following hypotheses refer to two-, three-, and four-year-old children:

Hypothesis 1. Preschool boys will choose to participate in play activities with the father rather than with the mother.

Hypothesis 2. Preschool girls will show no consistent choice for either the mother or the father.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 150 children accompanied to the nursery school by both parents. There were 18 boys and 17 girls in the two-year group; 29 boys and 28 girls in the three-year group; and 29 boys and 29 girls in the four-year group. This is the first parent-preference study reporting a separate two-year-old age group, although some have reported a combined two- and three-year-old group.

The criteria of selection were that: (a) the subjects were living with both biological parents or with adoptive parents since the age of 10 months or before (five were adopted); (b) they were at least second-generation United States citizens; (c) they were at least two but not yet five; and (d) their parents had at least a high school education. The parents were, in fact, disproportionately well educated; only six percent of the fathers and 16 percent of the mothers had no college education, and 26 percent of the fathers, but none of the mothers, had Ph.D. or professional degrees. Sixty-one percent of the mothers, however, did have college degrees. Fifteen percent of the fathers were students.

Procedures

A male and female experimenter presented the subject with seven parent-choice play situations. The parents were not in the play room when the choices were made, but rather remained in the waiting room until called to play with the child. When chosen, the parent was summoned into the play room, engaged in the activity with the child, and returned to the waiting room.

The following are the seven play situations requiring a parent choice:

1. Catwalk. The subject was shown a raised plank with blocks nailed in a staggered line upon it. The child was told that he was to balance a block on his head as he walked across the board. He was asked, "Who do you want to help keep the block from falling off of your head, your Mommy or your Daddy?"

2. London Bridge. The subject was asked, "Who do you want to be the other half of the bridge with you, your Daddy or your Mommy?"

3. Follow-the-Leader. After a brief game of follow-the-leader, the child was asked which parent did he now want to be the leader.

4. Etch-a-Sketch. This toy had two knobs and a viewing surface. The child was asked to choose a parent to "make a picture with you."

5. Follow-the-Arrows. Chairs, tables, and planks were connected by arrows to form a maze leading to a surprise (cookies and juice). The subject was asked to choose a parent to help him.

6. Stick-on-Animal. This activity required a choice of parent to help the child stick plastic animals on a landscape form-card which, unless the child was supported, was out of reach.

7. Blocks. The subject was asked to choose a parent to help him build something with blocks.

Each of these activities was thoroughly demonstrated so that the child knew what was involved in it before making a parent choice. This was done to give the play situations substance so that the choice would seem meaningful to the child.

Games were alternated with the items requiring a choice of parent. These games were introduced to disrupt the choice pattern, i.e., to prevent a pattern from forming in which the child alternated between mother and father choices. The experimenters, not the parents, participated with the child in these activities. The items were: geo-sticks, jigsaw puzzle, stick-together-clowns, marble game, drawing, and picture story book.

The order of game presentation was randomized for each subject; the sex of the presenting experimenter was randomized for each game; and the order of presentation of the parent which the experimenter named first in presenting the choice question, i.e., Mommy or Daddy or Daddy or Mommy, was randomized.

The scoring consisted in nothing more than recording the parent choices for each of the seven situations. The activities themselves served only the purpose of giving reality to the choices. Father or mother preference was operationally defined as choosing that parent four or more times out of the seven.

Results

The findings support Hypothesis 1, that preschool boys will choose to participate in play activities with the father rather than with the mother. Combining age groups, significantly more boys preferred the father over the mother; 51 preferred the father, 25 the mother ($x^2 = 8.9$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$). The table shows that in each age group more boys preferred the father to the mother, significantly so at the three-year level (binomial test, $p = .002$).

Hypothesis 2, that preschool girls will show no consistent preference, was supported for the combined age groups. Combining age groups, the girls showed equal preference for mother and father, 37 girls preferring each. The table, however, shows that two- and three-year-old girls preferred the father, significantly so at the two-year level (binomial test, $p = .049$), and that four-year-old girls significantly preferred the mother (binomial test, $p = .024$).

So, even though in line with Hypothesis 2, the preschool girls showed no consistent parent preference with ages combined, they did show significant preferences at ages two and four. These latter findings are not consistent with Hypothesis 2.

Combining both sexes, there was a significant age difference in parent preference, with the father preferred by two- and three-year-olds and the mother by four-year-olds ($x^2 = 9.45$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$). Boys taken alone, however, showed no significant age difference in parent preference. The girls did show a significant age difference, i.e., the two- and three-year-old girls preferred the father, but the four-year-old girls preferred the mother ($x^2 = 11.16$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$).

The table shows two-by-two frequency distributions comparing the sexes at each age level. The sexes differed significantly in parent preference at age four ($x^2 = 5.69$, $df = 1$, $p < .02$), but not at ages two and three.

Thus, the findings tend to support the hypothesis for boys, but not fully the one for girls. Perhaps the shift by girls from a significant father preference at age two to a significant mother preference at age four can be accounted for by pressure on girls to be concerned with their sex role, a pressure absent at age two but which builds up by age four. For boys, the pressure to shift from mother to masculine-role identification is postulated to come earlier. Two-year-old girls, perhaps unmotivated by sex-role considerations, might choose to be with the father because he is so often unavailable to them at home. However, by four their choice may be sex-role motivated. Goodenough (1957) offers evidence that fathers in particular are concerned that their girls, as well as their boys, behave in accordance with the appropriate sex-role standards by age four. Thus, the girls at that age might seek the mother as a model. More definitive research must be done to rule out alternative explanations for these finding for girls.

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Mother-Father Preference by Age and Sex

Age	Sex	Mother Preference (4 or more choices)	Father Preference (4 or more choices)	P*	N
2	Boys	7	11	ns	18
	Girls	4	13	.05	17
3	Boys	6	23	.0025	29
	Girls	12	16	ns	28
4	Boys	12	17	ns	29
	Girls	21	8	.025	29
TOTAL					150

*Binomial Distribution Table in Hodges and Lehman, 1964; p. 356.